

in *Singleness of Heart: Gender, Sin, and Holiness in Historical Perspective*, ix–xii.
By Diane Leclerc. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 2001
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Foreword

One of the characteristics often associated with the Wesleyan tradition is a propensity for “conjunctive thinking.” In contrast to those who frame Christian consideration of alternative truth claims as normatively requiring “either-or” choices, Wesleyans are described as more likely to seek “both-and” solutions—whether the issue be doctrinal debates within the Christian family or apparent differences between Christian beliefs and broader cultural views. This characterization is applied to Wesleyans as frequently by their peer Christian traditions as it is within their own circle, but it is not always evaluated in the same fashion. While Wesleyans usually tout their conjunctive approach as a strength, some of their sibling critics highlight it as the underlying source of the confusion and compromise that they charge permeates Wesleyan theology.

In all honesty, the Wesleyan tradition contains its share of theological works that excuse inadequate analysis and unresolved contradictions by flippant invocation of the superiority of both-and solutions. But this tradition has also fostered more authentic expressions of conjunctive theological reflection. At its best, this reflection is resolutely honest about the ambiguities—in biblical texts, historical sources, and our human experience of life and the world around us—that give rise to alternative theological claims and accounts. It is rigorous in its consideration of these ambiguities, drawing on the range of analytic methods and open to instruction from alternative perspectives. Most of all, it refuses to settle for that “lazy relativism” which simply affirms the various alternatives as equally adequate. While recognizing the limits of the certainty available in theological reflection (as an embodied and socially-located human enterprise), an authentic conjunctive approach strives to discern the *most* adequate account of the issues under dispute. This search often leads to endorsing one alternative over another, but on occasion it has

also spawned insights that recast positions which have long been considered contradictory, thereby introducing (or reclaiming!) an account that holds together and honors the central convictions of presumed antagonists. The latter outcome is the most satisfying fruit of conjunctive theological reflection.

What I have just described is obviously an ideal. I have no interest in arguing that it is a uniquely Wesleyan ideal—indeed, if it were, that would be cause for concern. Nor would I suggest that Wesleyans are naturally more adept at such conjunctive theological reflection. Like anyone else, they must intentionally and patiently cultivate the sensitivity, knowledge base, and analytic skills that this type of reflection requires. What I do want to suggest is that in the present book you will find an emerging scholar in the Holiness wing of the Wesleyan tradition who self-consciously embraces the ideal of conjunctive theological reflection, and who has clearly been cultivating the characteristics needed to pursue this reflection with admirable rigor.

Diane Leclerc devotes this study to an important twofold question: “What is the most adequate Christian diagnosis of our fundamental human problem?” and the corollary, “How should we understand the wholeness/holiness that Christianity seeks to promote?” While this interrelated topic is challenging in its own right, she has also chosen to approach it by bringing into dialogue some diverse (indeed, at points, antagonistic) conversation partners. This is an ambitious undertaking indeed! What makes Leclerc’s study so instructive is that she does not paper over differences between these perspectives, nor does she avoid the tough questions. Most of all, she does not assume that any learning or corrections that emerge from this conversation will flow in only one direction. No partner in this conversation emerges without some challenge for revision, or without some affirmation of their central concerns.

The most central conjunction that Leclerc attempts is to bring Christian tradition and current feminist philosophy (which is broadly critical of Christianity) into mutually instructive dialogue over her topic. She draws upon feminist insights to reveal the misogyny that is present in key traditional models of the nature of sin and sanctity. But she also uses these insights to discern some paradoxical ways in which traditional models opened space for (some) women to find more authentic lives and voices. Turning the dialogue around, she uses the concern for truly authentic life to challenge some streams of feminist philosophy—

particularly that stream which issues a blanket rejection of any claims about human “essence.”

In light of this overarching conjunction, Leclerc’s study can rightly be considered a Christian feminist critique of some traditional Christian understandings of the human problem (most specifically, the tendency to define the essence of sin solely as pride). But her’s is a very self-critical Christian feminism. Leclerc is quick to identify the inadequacies in some Christian feminist studies. In particular, she incisively rejects any claim of a feminist golden age in earliest Christianity. Her “usable past” is located in the paradoxical benefits that have emerged at times from both ambiguous and overtly misogynist exhortations and practices, not in a hypothetical ideal expression of equality.

This reflects a second central conjunction that Leclerc is attempting—the interweaving of rigorous historical investigation and constructive theological reflection. She finds little help in theological proposals that either ignore historical realities or are based on questionable historical arguments. But she is equally dissatisfied with Christian feminist studies that limit themselves to historical claims, abdicating the task of assessing and promoting the theological implications of these historical findings. Throughout this study Leclerc embodies the more interactive and contextually-sensitive enterprise of historical theology.

The context which Leclerc knows best, and engages most focally, is her own Wesleyan-Holiness tradition. This enables her to add a self-conscious Wesleyan voice to the larger ecclesial discussion of these issues. But she proves equally concerned to encourage critical reflection on the issues within her specific setting. Thus, while she readily celebrates the way in which women were empowered and affirmed as preachers by Wesley and by the early Wesleyan-holiness movement, she is quick to identify as well the ambiguities and outright misogynist elements in both cases. Her goal in this is not to discredit her tradition, but to call it toward even greater embodiment of the wholistic salvation that it has been distinctively concerned to proclaim.

Leclerc’s investigation makes a particular contribution to the area of Wesley studies by advancing the topic of “Wesley and women.” Previous work in this area has mainly highlighted Wesley’s interactions with women, and the transitions in his support of women preachers. Some have posed the question of whether Wesley gained any theological insight from this interaction, but none have actually attempted to identify and assess a doctrinal area where Wesley may have been informed by “women’s perspective.” Leclerc uses an analysis of Wesley’s pastoral

letters to women in his movement to argue that Wesley came to assert more clearly that self-idolatry is not the generic essence of sin that many have assumed, and to appreciate in particular that women are as likely to struggle instead with a tendency to “relational idolatry” (i.e., placing responsibility to children and/or husband above both their responsibility to God and a proper sense of self). The fruitfulness of this one case should encourage further gender-sensitive analyses of Wesley’s theology.

Leclerc also offers a challenge to internal scholarship within the Holiness wing of the Wesleyan tradition. She protests what she considers to be one-sided dismissals of the theological contribution of Phoebe Palmer. While conceding that some of her formulations are inadequate, Leclerc strives to reclaim positive aspects of Palmer’s theology. In particular, she argues that Palmer’s well-known “altar theology” enabled women to overturn “relational idolatry” and move towards an authentic sense of self in relation to God.

What Leclerc champions within her own tradition she returns to defend within the broad Christian tradition: a more nuanced and multivalent sense of the human problem, a sense that she insists predated the growing dominance of the Augustinian focus on pride as the essence of sin. The true essence of sin is idolatry—which can take the form of self-idolatry, but also the form of relational idolatry, and surely other forms as well. And the true essence of salvation is a renewed singleness of heart—where all idols are laid aside to center one’s life on the true God, and in this very move one finds both an authentic sense of self and a renewed capacity to relate to others in love.

Hopefully, this is enough of an appetizer to give you a sense of the fruit that emerges in this instance of conjunctive theological reflection. As you move into the book you will likely join me in giving thanks that the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition has empowered yet another woman to “find her voice,” and to join in the ongoing dialogue that is Christian theology.

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